

# REPENTING FROM IDOLATRY OF THE WAY THINGS ARE

by Craig Wong



*On the Sabbath Jesus began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.*

Mark 6:2-3

My great-grandfather was among the lot of those branded a serious threat to millions of hardworking males in turn-of-the-century America. His was also a hardworking lot—craftsmen, small-business owners, educators, and low-wage laborers hired by large corporations to build an ascending nation's growing infrastructure. The acceptance of the Chinese, handy as they were in building railroads and irrigation systems, was short-lived. As the post-Gold Rush economy began to fizzle, political pressure mounted to keep out all but the most productive Chinese, culminating in the infamous Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. This law, many hoped, would be the answer to the Chinese threat, not only to American jobs but also to public health and, most of all, the dominant Anglo culture. "Coolies," after all, were a disease-ridden lot with strange beliefs and customs unfit for the American way of life.

Within a few years, unsatisfied by the federal government's efforts to stem the tide of Chinese immigration, California passed another law—the 1889 Geary Act, which not only extended the Chinese Exclusion Act but also added an aggressive, ID-based enforcement feature. Under the Geary Act all Chinese were required to carry government-approved identification cards to be produced upon request by any law enforcement officer. Failure to show one's papers could result in

immediate arrest, imprisonment (with forced and heavy labor), and eventual deportation. Naturally this law instilled great fear within the Chinese community, regardless of an individual's legal status.

Reaction to the Geary Act, among both Chinese and non-Chinese leaders, was swift and emotional. Lawyers, advocacy organizations, business interests, and common citizens pulled together in concerted opposition. The policy, they argued, was unconstitutional on the basis of cruel and

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unusual punishment, including the acquisition of personal property and liberty, without prior indictment or jury trial. Within four years of its passing, the controversial law was taken to the highest court in the land (*Fong Ting Yue v. the United States*). On May 15, 1893, the Supreme Court upheld the Geary Act with a vote of 5-3 on the basis that a sovereign nation has the right to deport any people or race that it wants to—that is, any it fears will bring undesirable change to the way things are.

The recent Supreme Court decision to uphold the "show me your papers" portion of Arizona's SB1070 is not only a remarkable repeat of history but also a sobering mirror to our fundamental propensity, as sinners, to devolve into something less than human when we hold too tightly to the world as we know it, or at least to what we think it should be. We do this in resistance to a Creator whose authority transcends the authority of nations, and whose insistence in redeeming his fallen world necessitates change—whether or not

it feels comfortable or makes sense to us—for his limited yet beloved creatures.

The account of Jesus' experience in Nazareth captures this resistance. Jesus' neighbors took offense at Jesus' message, which was a call to repent from their sense of things or, most importantly, their idea of what the kingdom of God was all about—triumph rather than suffering, self-sacrifice, and radical inclusion. Although he preached with authority, their familiarity with him as Mary's son, the local carpenter, and one of many brothers provided a convenient excuse to disregard a new and unsettling direction.

I wonder if our ambivalence about the morality of our nation's exclusionary posture is directly tied to our own idolatry of the status quo, our deep-seated desire to keep things the way they are. Such resistance becomes painfully obvious whenever we chafe at truth spoken from the pulpit or from the lips of fellow congregants who question our choices or point out our sin. Resistance to change also rears its ugly head in congregational seasons of transition—that is, when it is time for the "old guard" to make room for the new.

It is well and good that growing evangelical voices are calling for just and humane immigration reform in our country. However, it behooves us to examine the sinful dispositions we share in common with those who fear a changing America. We, too, must repent from the ways we seek to inoculate ourselves from the gospel's demands, keeping our comfortable worlds intact, lest our public witness, and prophetic words, ring hollow.



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